

# Dr. Paul Hunter's Medical Blog

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11/13/07

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Letter to Editor of Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, submitted online

<http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=685311>

Patients come to me, a family physician, to clarify complex medical issues and to provide straightforward recommendations that will relieve pain, prevent suffering and extend their lives. I take that responsibility seriously. I expect my patients to hold me accountable if my recommendations result in pain, suffering or an early death.

Similarly, society expects public health officials to respond quickly to outbreaks of serious illnesses and if possible anticipate and prevent suffering and premature death. I have had the privilege of experiencing the efficiency and professionalism of our local, state and federal public health officials when I reported one of the first cases of monkeypox in Wisconsin. Voters and taxpayers hold such public health officials accountable if they raise alarms for an outbreak that never occurs or don't anticipate or respond quickly to an outbreak.

Who then calls to account reporters or narrow special interest groups if they confuse public opinion and derail effective public health recommendations and procedures? Unless such disinformation amounts to yelling 'fire' in a crowded theater, first amendment rights should protect such speech, even if such publicity results in unnecessary deaths and suffering from the general public not participating in proven public health campaigns. Even if legal, such unbalanced, narrow-minded misinformation is morally bankrupt.

The role of the press and special interest groups as watch dogs of governmental and corporate abuse of power is paramount in American society. Protecting the public, however, requires diligent research and well-reasoned and sustained efforts to effect lasting change.

The 11/13/07 story about mercury in influenza vaccinations belonged in a middle school English teacher's in-basket rather than on the front page of the newspaper of one the 20 largest cities in America. The level of research involved appeared to be simply rephrasing material from several websites. The lack of quotes from public health officials was irresponsible. Sugar-coating with somewhat balanced headlines does not absolve the editors from the damage cause to public health by giving such a high profile to this article. Shame on you.

Paul Hunter MD